

NEWSLETTER

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Program Evaluation for the Practitioner

Using EVALUATION as a SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT Strategy

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING. *This phrase is familiar to most schools and districts engaged in comprehensive school reform and improvement. It reminds practitioners that their plans have a greater likelihood of succeeding if the goals and strategies within them are based on solid information and not on hunches or habit. But where can schools get the data they need? As they strive for continuous improvement, how do they know which goals and strategies to keep or expand and which to drop? This month's newsletter explains how schools can use program evaluation strategies to gather and analyze data and make informed decisions that contribute to continuous improvement.*

What Is Program Evaluation?

Quite simply, evaluation means taking a closer look at and getting feedback about an undertaking, with an eye to making a decision about its value. In schools, program evaluation means examining initiatives the school has undertaken—whether the initiative is an approach to literacy instruction or a program to support struggling students—to answer the question, “Is what we are doing working?” In school environments, evaluators are often seen as outsiders trying to get a better understanding of how well students are learning and teachers are teaching (Angelo & Cross, 1993). But evaluation is not just for outsiders. Many evaluation techniques

are easy to execute; can make use of data that are already being gathered; and can be performed on a scale that is practical for teachers, principals, and other school leaders. These “internal” evaluations can provide useful information about what is happening in the school and a strong, data-driven foundation for designing, implementing, and improving strategies that promote student achievement.

Why Is Program Evaluation Important in Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement?

Most school improvement plans contain multiple goals and dozens of strategies that the staff will implement in support of increased student achievement. Fewer plans, though, identify how the staff will determine if those strategies have been implemented as intended or have produced desired outcomes. This is where program evaluation proves useful by providing the feedback practitioners need to make those determinations. The results obtained from an evaluation can suggest ways to modify the implementation of a practice or uncover a need for more professional development to support its implementation. With programs that take longer to provide significant improvements, informal evaluation strategies can track initial changes in outcomes. Early feedback, especially indications of initial success, can help build support for a program and provide an early warning of potential problems so they can be addressed (Hansel & Cavell, n.d.).

How Is It Done?

Even when practitioners understand why program evaluation is important, they often do not feel they have the skills to do it. Although a complex or large-scale evaluation is best left to the professional evaluator, the following five steps can be used by practitioners in any setting to effectively gather and interpret useful data.

STEP 1. *Set the stage and clarify goals.*

Often, the best time to make decisions about evaluation is when a program is being designed. A staff meeting or plan-writing session can provide an opportunity to discuss the proposed program, why it is being initiated, and its intended effects. For example, a school staff might decide to start a voluntary afterschool tutoring program in mathematics and English. They would begin by discussing the target audience and how the program will operate, but they also would clarify what they hope to accomplish: improved passing rates, for instance, or a greater number of students proficient on state assessments. The clearer and more specific the goals for the program are from the outset,

the more likely it is that the evaluation will be able to determine if those goals were achieved. The participation of the staff in the initial design will also help to ensure their full and active participation in the evaluation activities.

STEP 2. *Create evaluation questions.*

The designers of an informal evaluation can use their goals to create questions that the evaluation will answer. In the case of the tutoring program, the staff might decide that it wants to know the following:

- Was the tutoring program implemented as designed? Did implementation support the established goals?

- Did participation in the program have a positive effect on student achievement in mathematics and reading?
- How many students chose to participate in the tutoring program? Did the number of participants grow over time? Did participation improve participants' outlook toward school?

STEP 3. *Decide what data are needed and how to collect them.*

Once the evaluation questions have been formulated, the next step is to decide what data are needed to answer them. Practitioners should avoid designing elaborate data collection methods and focus instead on using data that are already available or easy to collect. Using team planning time or a portion of every staff meeting to discuss and informally summarize tutoring sessions will provide implementation data that address the first question. If the school already uses pretests and posttests or other assessment measures periodically throughout the year, gathering student achievement data for the participants in the afterschool program will be relatively easy. Answering the student participation questions might require new data collection tools, but here, too, the emphasis should be on simplicity and practicality. The first step would be to establish a system to track attendance. A sign-in sheet or computer logon screen would work. Participant interviews can provide data about students' interest in the program, if and how the program has improved their attitude toward school, and even what changes they would recommend.

STEP 4. *Analyze and interpret data.*

By analyzing and interpreting the data collected, the staff can make an informal judgment about how well the goals of the tutoring program have been met. Notes and recorded comments on the structure of the tutoring sessions, lesson plans, and activities can be examined. Average gains in test scores can be computed and trend

data examined. Percentages, averages, and other statistical measures can be calculated to determine patterns in daily attendance at tutoring sessions. Student interview data can be analyzed to determine why students participate and how the program can be improved.

The timing of the data analysis and interpretation should be driven by the evaluation questions. Staff members might decide to interpret some data formatively—that is, while the program is being conducted—so they can see what implementation modifications and adjustments are suggested. Other data are best analyzed at the program's end (such as the end of the school year or semester) and used to assist in decision making about further intervention efforts.

STEP 5. *Use the results.*

After staff members have discussed the analyzed data from their afterschool program, they need to formulate one more important evaluation question: "What will we do with what we found out?" It is likely that the data collected provide useful information about what was accomplished but also highlight areas that need improvement. Armed with this information, the staff has what it needs to revise and adapt the program for the following year.

Conclusion

Evaluation strategies can and should be an essential component of school improvement planning for practitioners. The process provides staff with information about how well programs are implemented, what changes need to occur, and what difference, if any, the program is making. Evaluating eliminates guesswork and provides an objective framework for judging the value of initiatives undertaken by a school. With the information gained from evaluating their programs, schools have data they can use to make informed decisions.

More information on program evaluation for practitioners can be found in *Evaluating Whole-School Reform Efforts: A Guide for District and School Staff* published in August 2000 by the Region 10 Comprehensive Center and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The guide is available at www.nwrac.org/whole-school/index.html.

References

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hansel, L., & Cavell, L. (n.d.). *Unlocking the 11 components of CSR*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform.



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